

The Power of Online Learning

Dr. Gene Wilhoit, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, addresses the benefits of online learning, what a quality program looks like, and what it will take for students to flourish in the global economy.

As someone who has observed the power of online learning in states throughout the country, can you speak to the various benefits these types of programs provide for schools?

I have seen the power of online learning to positively impact the lives of students. I saw it in a young man who attended a small, remote high school in the mountains of Kentucky who had "toped out" of the curriculum as a sophomore. Through online learning, he was able to take advanced placement courses, apply credits to his chosen college and secure a scholarship to a prestigious liberal arts college. I have talked with teachers who are able to access a curriculum and teaching resources through online networks. I have listened to students describe with excitement the rich learning resources they are able to tap and how those resources have accelerated their learning. I have seen the student who was unsuccessful in a regular classroom soar through technology-based, self-paced learning. Beyond the impact on individual lives, online learning has pushed educators to question historic practices, to move from time-bound instruction to performance learning, from mass delivery to student-centered learning.

Online learning often is billed as a way for schools to expand the breadth of course offerings, providing students with more choices. How can schools ensure certain online programs meet the same standards of quality and accountability as traditional, face-to-face courses?

If online learning is merged with the concept of performance-based credentialing, the learning experiences can be designed to allow students to demonstrate mastery of content and cognitive challenge. In fact, this sort of learning has tied to it greater accountability than more traditional approaches, resulting in clearer expectations, greater oversight of delivery and quality assurance. But I add a caution: We must keep the human aspect in the learning process, on site and with trained online instructors.

What are the key elements that need to be in place for an online learning program to succeed? What does a successful program look like?

A successful program is well-designed, in terms of learning goals and curricular design; delivered with powerful and robust

technology systems; supported through strong guidance and counseling at home or at school; and accompanied with high-quality training of online instructors. A successful program is facilitated by state support structures that encourage the movement to online learning by removing barriers to credentialing students, teachers and programs; providing the technology infrastructure; and supporting strong counseling structures for students.

Much is being made about the need to ready students for success in the 21st century economy. What role can online learning play in helping to prepare students for life and work in an increasingly global world?

I cannot see education in the near future that is disconnected from technology-based learning. What is now seen as a value add to traditional education delivery will become central to learning, with or without the consent of educators. The combination of advancements in technology, the coming together of world economic powers and new developments in science are reconstructing every aspect of life. Our students are the generation that will benefit from this transformation and ours is the responsibility to prepare them as best we can. We must help them make new and exciting connections to the world through instruction. We must show them new environments and help them preserve their world. We can use technology to connect to real job experiences and people engaged in exciting careers. We can remove barriers of geography and time. And we can use technology to model the work environments of the future.

This generation of students will be the last to tolerate any institution that is not representative of the world in which they are engaged and thriving. Business writer Alan Deutschman once wrote, "Change or Die." Rather, I might say, "Embrace and Flourish."

